



August Wilson's Signification on the Kójódá within the "Structurally Conservative" *Fences*

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How we both make use of them [plot . . . dialogue . . . characterization...design] will be determined by who we are . . . what ground we are standing on and what our cultural values are.

-August Wilson

Abstract

Despite being hailed as August Wilson's "most structurally conservative work . . . modeled on the well-made play" (Savran 20), the plot of *Fences* signifies on a calendar system within Yorùbá cultural practice used to organize personal, communal, business, and spiritual affairs known as the Kójódá. Wilson deploys what I term an ethnocultural dramatic structure (EDS), an act that can be undersigned or premeditated given his dramaturgical positionality and the ethics of the community in which he was raised. Within an EDS framework the usual posts along which well-made plays are developed—exposition, inciting incident, climax, falling action, and resolution—are influenced by and/or at times wholly subordinate to cultural beliefs, practices, rituals and other semiotics, spiritual episteme, mythologies, and cosmologies of the racial or ethnic group at the center of the text. In this fashion, Wilson dramatically treats the experiences of Black Americans, with full cognizance of Western formulaic constructions in playwriting, yet the social behaviors of his characters and his plotlines are propelled by identifiable diasporic formations of indigenous African practices and concepts.

Keywords

Fences; Kojoda; Yoruba; Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure

August Wilson's body of literature is rife with clues of his anthropological analysis of Blacks in the Diaspora begging to be illuminated and examined. Once, during a post-show conversation, Wilson asked how many in a crowd of about two hundred recognized the characters as African. Less than ten indicated they did. "I'm very curious as to why they refuse [to see these characters as Africans]—I have to say it's a refusal because it's so obvious (Savaran 34). Wilson himself stood firmly on the ground of his socialized, cultivated, re-membered African-ness despite his bi-racial heritage, his theatrical development and success in predominantly white American theatre settings, and his acknowledgement of the European art form that he has embraced (Lyons and Plimpton). Consequently, his sensibilities demand that critics, readers, and spectators eschew the primary reliance on dominant aesthetic values and examine more deeply the Africanist elements within his dramaturgy. Using this approach privileges the ground on which he stood in any critical discussion. In a 1987 interview with David Savran, Wilson entreats readers and



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spectators to more deeply engage the cultural distinctions within his dramatic reconstructions of the Black community:

Blacks do not have a history of writing—things in Africa were passed on orally. In that tradition you orally pass on your entire philosophy, your ideas and attitudes about life. Most of them were passed along in blues. You have to make the philosophy interestingly musically and lyrically, so that someone will want to repeat it, to teach it to someone else as soon as they've heard it. If you don't make it interesting, the information dies . . . An African man has a whole different field of manners. All cultures have their mythology, their creative motifs and social and political organizations. To my mind, people just gloss over these things in the black community without really examining it and seeing what's there. (26)

“What's there,” Sandra Richards notes in *Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*, is an aesthetic that is “creolized” in its implementation of Africanist cultural knowledge, and Western values. In her estimation Wilson signifies on “master codes” of the Western culture with Africanist beliefs and practices, the result of which is a “syncretic dynamic that looks like and departs from hegemonic culture” (15). To support her claim, Richards uses the example of the tenuous strain between the play's protagonist, Troy, and his younger Cory in *Fences* as an example of the familiar yet different.

The contentious father-son dynamic in Wilson's *Fences* will be familiar to most spectators (or readers) regardless of race because they too have had to struggle with parental authority, but Troy Maxson's absolute refusal to support his son's dream of playing [college football], based in a personal and collective history of racism, critiques the white, national convention of optimism about the future (15).

There are recognizable strains which both characterize and challenge Troy and Cory's relationship. In Cory's mind, Rose's fence is not the only obstacle; Troy's authoritarianism also places limitations on him. The dominant tropes which strain Troy and Cory's relationship—parental desires of educational attainment and employment stability—are grounded in Troy's well-founded but restrictive fears of Cory's likely encounters with racism and desire for a football career that could suffer a premature ending or might not ever experience a beginning. The National Football League was much slower to racially integrate its teams, and, unlike the Negro Baseball Leagues, there were no nationally organized segregated teams for Black football players. Between 1904 and 1933, the ranks of the American Professional Football Association and the National Football League experienced very narrow integration because many state laws prohibited integrated sports teams. The Los Angeles Rams were the first professional football team to sign African American players, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, in 1946, a mere eleven years before *Fences* is set (Wolf 2009). Herein lies Troy's critique of professional sports and wariness regarding an optimistic future for Cory's full participation in and enjoyment of a sustained career. History has made him skeptical and otherwise practical.

Familiar themes of the human condition in *Fences* aside, its dramatic structure is also creolized in that “looks like and departs from” more hegemonic forms of dramaturgy. An African diasporic informed reading of the text reveals a narratological practice that, while embracing the mode of the well-made play, simultaneously signifies on a calendar system within Yorùbá cultural practice, the Kójódá (Green 2020, 2016). For a playwright whose origins lie in a community known by many names, “the Crossroads of the World”¹ and “Little Haiti”² among them, this cultural admixture is unsurprising. Although Wilson dramatically orchestrates experiences of Black Americans with full cognizance of Western formulaic constructions in playwriting, viewing the text

¹ The Hill District was a geographic crossroads for musicians and a melting pot for immigrants.

² Free middle-class Blacks of the Hill District, seeking their own independence, referred to their beloved community as Little Haiti in ethical alignment with Haiti's fight for and subsequent political liberation from France in 1804.

and characters as Wilson intended for us to see them, reveals that the social behaviors of his characters and his plotlines are propelled by identifiable forces, and diasporic formations of indigenous African practices and concepts. Hence, even as Wilson borrows from elements of modern playwriting, through his own blood's memory, consciousness, and cultural grounding, he simultaneously revises these "dominant tropes" in his texts, suggesting a dramaturgical process that is culturally conjunctural.

Fences is hailed as Wilson's "strongest, most passionate American dramatic writing" (Barnes) and his "most structurally conservative work . . . modeled on the well-made play" (Savran 20). The well-made play is a nineteenth century dramatic convention of French dramatist Eugène Scribe that has continued to shape the tradition of playwriting well into the present, with some structural variations that depart from Scribe's blueprint. Broadly speaking, in the world of a well-made play, a crisis disrupts what may already be a tenuous condition. The plot begins late in the storyline; the action builds around attempts to circumvent obstacles of increasing complexity, working towards the climax, while the plot generally wraps up with no loose ends. Necessary exposition is provided by the characters, which tend to be few (with perhaps one character predominating the group), and scenes and locales are limited. In keeping with this framework, *Fences* is set entirely in the exterior of the Maxon home. Each of the seven characters is described in relationship to Troy, the hero around whom the entire play is constructed. Within the first two pages of the play, a major plotline is revealed—Troy's racial discrimination complaint is under investigation by the labor union—and the remainder of the play's exposition continues to unfold throughout the first of the two acts.

Despite these very present well-made play markers, including the play's ending with the entire cast of characters assembled for Troy's burial rites, there are fragments of ancestral bones, an ethnocultural dramatic structure (Green 2016, 156) informed by the Kójódá, within *Fences*' "structurally conservative" dramatic trellis. An ethnocultural dramatic structure—deployed unthinkingly, or by design—is observed through the presence of distinct cultural markers which influence the play's arrangement of actions, and subsequently the social behaviors of its characters. At times, markers of EDS are observed to co-exist alongside the usual posts of the well-made play: exposition, inciting incident, climax, falling action, and resolution, thus creating a structural bricolage of identifiable forms. There are also moments when posts of the well-made play are observed to be wholly subordinate to cultural beliefs, practices, rituals and other semiotics, spiritual episteme, mythologies, and cosmologies of the racial or ethnic group at the center of the text. In *Fences* as well as other plays in the American Century Cycle such as *Gem of the Ocean* (Green 2016) and *Two Trains Running* (Green 2020), Wilson signifies on the Kójódá because the metaphysical insight embodied in the calendar system reflects the sphere of extreme importance in his dramaturgy, inarguably personified most in Aunt Ester, the world to which his characters turned when they needed the most guidance and psychological support (Wilson, *Hedley* x). While Aunt Ester does not figure in *Fences*, the ancestral presence and cultural values she embodies are invoked most conspicuously, though not only, through song ("Old Blue/Old Dog Blue") and dance (Gabe's atavistic dance) in the play's closing scene.

The Kójódá is a calendar system within Yorùbá cultural practices used to organize personal, communal, business, and spiritual affairs of practitioners of *Èsin Òriṣà Ìbílẹ̀*. The calendar's original temporal formation, a four-day agrarian and religious day calendar, was used for market and worship purposes in Yorùbáland. To standardize the days of Òriṣà worship across towns, the Kójódá expanded to include the full seven-days of the Gregorian week (Epega and Neimark, 1995, 507). The origin and purpose of the Kójódá are detailed within the sacred orature of Ifá, a cultural body of wisdom expressed in 256 binary symbols known as Odù. Each Odù with its associated verses, a code of pragmatic and cultural conduct, offers ancient truths and spiritual guidance for navigating the contemporary present, and solutions for maintaining ethical behavior and navigating conflict. The calendar system, like Odù, is informed by Yorùbá cosmology, history, and philosophy. The Odù *Òkànràn-Òfún* lists the names of the seven days of the week and narrates the series of events which took place within the Garden of Command, that influenced how the days came to be named. A brief listing of "the order and significance" of each weekday is also listed in *Òtúrúpón-Túrà*, an Odù which addresses the general idea of the importance of structure, for example bones,

cultural institutions, and the organization of societies (505). In one verse of Òtúrúpón-Túrá, Òrúnmilà beseeches Olódùmarè for control over the sun. However, “Olódùmarè said that he could not give him control of the daylight but would let him know the names of the days and the things that are most suitable to do on those days” (506). Thus, whether that is honoring the Òriṣà week or “observing marriages and birthdays, ... starting a business or moving into a new home, and so on” (507), the Kójódá offers adherents a structure for prevision and for regulating events within one’s means of control.

The figure below summarizes the Kójódá and key attributes of each time unit (see Figure 1. The Kójódá). The first-row charts how each major division and sequence of actions within *Fences* aligns with a given day. The second row notes the names of each unit within the seven-day week. The third and fourth rows contain the names and qualities of each day based on events that took place within the Garden of Command, respectively. The fifth and final row references the Òriṣà, commonly associated with the attributes of each day, which also marks the most optimal occasion for venerating each deity within diasporic formations of Ifá-Òriṣà practice.³ The subsequent analysis of how elements of the Kójódá inform Wilson’s plot construction is linear, aligning with the structure of the calendar, which reads left to right or Sunday – Saturday. Therefore, the evaluation begins with Sunday, Act 2.3 rather than Friday, Act 1.1.

Figure 1: The Kójódá

<i>Fences 2.3</i>				<i>Fences 2.2</i>	<i>Fences 1.1, 1.4, 2.4</i>	<i>Fences 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.5</i>
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Ojò Àikú	Ojò Ajé	Ojò Ìṣégún	Ojò Rú	Ojò Bo	Ojò Ètì	Ojò Àbáméta
Day of long life and tranquility; ascension; immortality; and settling disputes	Day of commerce; initiating of educational, social programming; financial success	Day of victory	Day of confusion; the day opens the door and goes out	Day of fulfillment; creation; ancestral return; return of sun to its normal course	Day of trouble, prolonged struggle; fight, procrastination; postponement; impossibility; or quarrel	Day of three suggestions; three resolutions; three wonders; or three negative incidents
Obatala, Òrúnmilà, Òrì	Yemoja/Olókun	Ògún, Òsòsì	Oya	Sàngó	Òṣun	Èṣù

Sunday, Ojò Àikú: Act 2.3

Fences maintains its attention to a key feature of the Kójódá in its treatment of Sunday. The day is one of settling disputes and is further characterized by long life and tranquility, ascension, and immortality. On this day, Rose comes to terms with the state of her relationship with Troy. Their marriage, loveless since his confession and persistent reluctance to end his affair with Alberta, creates a void in Rose’s life. She comes to accept Raynell as her own daughter as, “A motherless child has got a hard time” (*Fences* 79), and furthermore, perceives her as “all them babies I had wanted and never had . . .” (98). However, from that point forward she is no longer a crewman on her (relation)ship with Troy, declaring that he is a “womanless man” (79). Rose’s internal dispute between allowing herself to be emotionally mistreated by Troy as opposed to being the skipper of her own life and dictating the terms upon which she would remain in the relationship with him, ends. The nautical references are intentional as in this point of the play, Rose, whose previous energy favored Òbà, the Òriṣà who protects home, family, and marriage, begins to exhibit qualities of the

³ This may vary across lineages in Yoruba land and diasporic practice. There are also dynamic calendar arrangements for Òriṣà worship based on planetary configurations and moon cycles.

Òriṣà, Yemoja, the "Mother whose children are fish." Yemoja is an Òriṣà who compels individuals to preserve self in the way that the salt-waters of the womb protects and "preserves the mysteries of gestation" (Frisvold 52). The fish analogy is also significant here. For three days, much like the period of infancy for fish eggs and larvae, Raynell was also defenseless and without the nurturing presence of a mother. In Rose's assumption of this new responsibility created through Troy's wanderlust, she further embodies the traits of Yemoja, who comes to the aid of those who are vulnerable, abandoned, and/or marginalized.

Thursday, Ọjọ Bo: Act 2.2

The key actions of this day are consistent with the principles noted in the Kójódá—fulfillment, creation, and ancestral return. On this day, "Mr. Death" (ikù) gets closer to Troy. His mistress, Alberta, dies giving birth to Raynell, their daughter. Thus, as Alberta's life is fulfilled or one door closes, another one opens ushering in the return of an ancestor (Raynell). Alberta, like the Òriṣà of fecundity, potentiality, love, seduction, and joy, Ọṣun, has fulfilled her mission of being a source of renewal for Troy, and Raynell, the creation of their union, becomes the sweet breeze of renewal in the wounded Maxon family (Savran 33).

While building the fence was originally Rose's idea, upon learning of Alberta's death, Troy resolves to finish it. His resolution is born of his own selfish desire to keep ikù "over there" and protect the remainder of what he believed belonged to him and not necessarily his commitment to the integrity of Rose's desire to build a hedge of protection around her family unit (and prevent Troy's infidelity):

TROY: Alright . . . Mr. Death. See now . . . I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you're ready for me. Then you come on . . . when the top of your list say Troy Maxson . . . that's when you come around here . . . Ain't nobody else got nothing to do with this. This is between you and me (*Fences* 77).

Friday, Ọjọ Etì: Act 1.1, 1.4, and 2.4

Following the Kójódá, Fridays are associated with Ọṣun but are also prone to trouble, delay, struggle, and quarrel. Wilson engages the energy of Ọṣun through the playfulness in the ritual of post-work laughter, "gin talk" between Troy and Bono, Troy's flirtation and not-so-subtle hints of his sexual desire of Rose. However, these joyous rituals of payday, "gin talk," and lovemaking (the "straights") are always balanced by conflict (the "crooked"). In Act 1.1 Troy recounts to Bono that he confronted his boss about employment inequities but was told to take it up with the sanitation commissioner. Troy's opposition of the hiring inequities on his job has many of his colleagues, namely Brownie, who sees Troy as a troublemaker, worried about potential repercussions. Bono, suspicious of Troy's developing affair with Alberta, accuses him of ". . . doing more than eye-ing her" (Wilson, *Fences* 3), an accusation which begins tearing at the fabric of their friendship. With a righteous indignation, Troy maintains his innocence, but as we learn later, this indiscretion is a key source of dramatic tension within the play; he is in fact, having an affair. Fridays are also Troy's payday. This fact comes with predictable visits from Lyons, Troy's eldest son, and his frustrating appeals for a ten-dollar loan. Troy, who sees Lyons as irresponsible and lazy, uses his monetary request as an opportunity to express his disapproval with his lifestyle. "You living the fast life . . . wanna be a musician . . . running around in them clubs and things . . . then, you learn to take care of yourself. You ain't gonna find me going and asking nobody for nothing . . . you still trying to get something for nothing. Life don't owe you nothing . . ." (18). Because of Troy's work ethic and Lyons's age, he does not understand his son's need to vigorously pursue his musicianship despite the economic unreliability it offers. As such, Lyons, who Troy views as a feral child (or young cub), is unable to escape Troy's stinging critiques. Troy blames Lyons' immaturity on the way his mother raised him. Yet, because of his underlying guilt about his absence (Troy was jailed for fifteen years of Lyons' life) and Rose's insistence, he always concedes and gives Lyons the money. Consistent with the underlying spiritual conflict of Friday noted in the Kójódá, Wilson uses the play's opening to introduce key sources of conflict for Troy—his desire to overcome the limitations of his job, his

longing to ever-so-gently stretch the boundaries of his marriage and momentarily lay down his burden of responsibility, as well as the challenges he faces in his ability to pass down the ideal of self-sufficiency to his children without destroying their personal quests for self-determination.

In Act 1.4, despite being illiterate and unlicensed, Troy is promoted from refuse collector to truck driver. In the social winds of change that are underpinning the play, he becomes the first Black man to break this employment barrier. However, the triumph of the day is overshadowed by his altercation with Cory later that evening. After finding out that Cory has lied about maintaining his after-school job at the local supermarket, Troy demands that the coach cut him from the team, challenging Cory's opportunity to be recruited to college on a football scholarship. Angrily, Cory throws his helmet in Troy's direction and accuses his father of being fearful of his chances at success. Troy responds by informing he has earned his first "strike." Cory's disobedience and public insolence tips the day's tenuous forces and earns him a lenient but exacting threat from Troy: "I'm gonna tell you what your mistake was. See . . . you swung at the ball and didn't hit. That's strike one. See, you in the batter's box now. You swung and you missed. That's strike one. Don't you strike out!" (58).

Act 2.4 remains consistent with the friction that underlies the day as expressed in the *Kójódá*. However, Wilson departs from the blueprint of the two previous Fridays (joyous moments followed by conflict), fully dramatizing the somber energy of the day. As Troy enters the house, Rose leaves with Raynell for church and Cory leaves the yard. On his way to a game of checkers, Bono comes to visit after "a month of Sundays" (82). However, the two don't engage in their customary routine of Friday night "gin talk." Bono, who confronted Troy about his affair with Alberta earlier in the play, but stood by him, is now unwilling to go the distance with his friend. Because of Troy's infidelity, he is challenged by what he perceives as his lack of integrity. Consequently, it's been a "month of Sundays" since Bono participated in their Friday night ritual. As expressed in the *Kójódá*, the struggle of the day climaxes into a show-down between Cory and Troy and the generational sequence of father-son conflict comes full circle. Just as Troy was violently beaten and banished from his home by his father, Cory earns his third strike as he swings at Troy with his baseball bat, and Troy expels him from the house. The scene closes with Troy standing in the batter's box taunting "Mr. Death," an ever-present antagonist of *Fences*, "the fastball on the outside corner" (89).

Saturday, Ojò Àbáméta: Act 1.2, 1.3, Act 2.1, and 2.5

The same energy of Friday, in some ways, also characterizes each Saturday. As such, the day is generally spent in preparation and certain activities are avoided (Neimark 50). Wilson introduces the theme of preparation through the clarion call of Troy's brain-damaged brother, Gabe, the spectacle character of the play. In one of the play's most important moments, Gabe warns, "Better get ready for the judgment" (*Fences* 27). Wilson signifies on Gabe's leitmotif by limiting all woodworking and fence installation to Saturday afternoons. The fence is supposed to "keep [death] out . . . and keep [Troy's family] in" (61). On each Saturday, Wilson varies in his approach to the symbolization of the three suggestions, resolutions, negative incidents, or three wonders noted in Yorùbá creation stories and attributed to the day. Subsequently, what appears as random banter are illustrative social actions, and exchanges in dialogue that broaden our understanding of the characters' inner lives, build emotional intensity, move the plot forward, or ritually invoke some occurrence on the metaphysical level.

In Act 1.2 Rose observes that Troy has awakened on the wrong side of the bed after his complaints about Black folk playing the numbers, the way Pope privileges white folk over Black folk with good service in the running of his restaurant, and Cory's absence and failure to complete his chores. Wilson returns to all three of these themes in Act 1.3: fiscal irresponsibility, ensuring that folks are treating him honorably, and the application of work ethic towards that which is practical as opposed to competitive sports. During the only ostensibly father/son bonding moment between Troy and Cory in Act 1.3, we are introduced to Troy's pragmatic nature and the tense dynamics of their relationship. During their exchange over woodwork, Wilson illustrates three expository stories that all contain lessons for Cory. First, when Troy explains he cannot buy a television and neglect repairing the roof, Troy teaches Cory the importance of fiscal responsibility. On the topic of the limitations of Black athleticism, Troy lectures Cory on taking the "crooked with the straights" (*Fences* 37). Cory must simultaneously go to school, maintain employment at the A&P or through

a trade that places no limitations on his ability to ascend, *and* attend football practice. And during the third expository narrative—the infamous moment in which Cory asks, “How come you ain’t never liked me?” (37)—Troy harshly explains that it is more important to “[make] sure [folks] doing right by [him] (38).

Three events take place in Act. 2.1 which demonstrate the adverse spiritual forces at play on this day as outlined in the Kójódá. Gabe, whom the local authorities view as a public nuisance, is locked up and subsequently released through a pay-off (the sixth or seventh one). In spite of his reluctance to institutionalize his brother, when Troy signs the release papers, it is discovered six-months later that he unknowingly committed Gabe to a mental hospital and re-claimed part of his disability check. Rose says, “I said send him to the hospital . . . and you said let him be free . . . and now you done went down there and signed him to the hospital for half his money. You went back on yourself, Troy. You gonna have to answer for that” (75). Despite Rose’s witness of Troy’s signature, he continues to deny the accusation. In the second misfortune on this Saturday, Troy discloses his affair with Alberta, her subsequent pregnancy, and his refusal to end their relationship. The third peril of the day arises when Cory earns his second strike defending his mother from Troy’s threatening demeanor.

The third Saturday of the play, Act 2.5, is set in 1965, and the winds of change have blown again. The infant Raynell is now eight years old and very concerned about tending to her garden of vegetables and flowers. In keeping with the day’s emphasis on preparation, the family is planning for Troy’s funeral. Bono is heading to church to get the pallbearers lined up; Rose is making breakfast for Lyons; Raynell is told repeatedly to get dressed. Unlike the preceding eight scenes, Wilson does not note the day in the script. However, in addition to the morning’s focus on preparation, events in sequences of three persist as in the previous Saturdays. First, Troy’s sons, Lyons, Cory, and his brother, Gabe, must all await release papers from respective institutions to attend Troy’s funeral—the penal system, the military, and the hospital. In an interview with David Savran Wilson says, “the only free person is the girl, Troy’s daughter, the hope for the future. That was conscious on my part because in ’57 that’s what I saw. Blacks have relied on institutions which are really foreign” (Savran 33). Second, Cory’s individual exchanges with Lyons, Rose, and Raynell in which they each re-member the best of Troy, enables Cory’s release of the psychological trauma and grief he carries over his father. His third exchange with Raynell ends in their singing of “Old Blue”:

CORY: . . . Old Blue died and I dug his grave
I dug his grave with a silver spade
Let him down with a golden chain
And every night I call his name
Go on Blue, you good dog you
Go on Blue, you good dog you . . . (*Fences* 99)

The song—an incantation of remembrance that connects generations of Maxons, past and present—contains the advisable code of conduct. Cory, who has come to tell his mother he doesn’t plan to attend Troy’s funeral, relents, rising to the call to honor his father, the flawed but noble man who gave him his life.

The third ritually significant moment in the scene is Gabe’s signal to St. Peter to open the gates of heaven. After three blows, it is fully unclear if Gabe is successful in producing sound or not. The stage directions read:

Gabriel with great fanfare, braces himself to blow. The trumpet is without a mouthpiece. He puts the end of it into his mouth and blows with great force, like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this single moment. No sound comes out of the trumpet. He braces himself and blows again with the same result. A third time he blows. There is a weight of impossible description that falls away and leaves him bare and exposed to a frightful realization (101).

One way to read the text is on the premise that because the trumpet doesn't have a mouthpiece which would enable it to produce sound, it becomes a wonderous moment of spectacle when Gabe produces sound after the third attempt. The stage directions read, "*A third time he blows.*" Given that they do not say Gabe was unsuccessful as they communicate in the previous two attempts, it leaves some room for creative interpretation, as Denzel Washington demonstrates in his 2016 film adaptation of *Fences*. In the film, on the third attempt, Gabriel's horn produces sound, and St. Peter opens the gates of heaven. However, another way to read the moment—and one that is more in keeping with Wilson's dramatic vision—is that after the third blow, Gabe comes to realize his own powerlessness against dark forces and the ineffectiveness of the source of his strength as suggested by the meaning of his name, "God is my strength." Wilson challenges years of unwavering belief in his identification with the iconic archangel of Judeo-Christianity in this climactic moment, producing "*a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand*" (101). Consequently, Gabriel, like Harold Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* before him, reaches into himself, sourcing strength from ancestral intermediaries within the moral compass of his universe, fashioned in his own likeness, for an atavistic song and dance that can open the gates of heaven for Troy.

The Kójódá also marks Saturday as a day to venerate the Òriṣà Èṣù, the messenger of communication and guardian of crossroads, intersections, doors, and thresholds. Gabe's ancestral impulses which facilitate his opening of the doors between worlds is consistent with the energy of the day and the positionality and functions of Èṣù. In the Yorùbá tradition of *Èṣin Òriṣà Ibílẹ̀*, Èṣù, whose numbers are 3, 7, and 21, is the mediator of supernatural forces such as the Irunmole (primordial deities) and Ajogun (death, disease, loss, paralysis, trouble, curses, imprisonment, affliction, etc.). Èṣù carries prayers and sacrifices to their respective places, and works closely with fellow warriors Ògún, the spirit of iron (who, in some places of the African diaspora is syncretized with St. Peter, possessor of the two iron keys that unlock Heaven's gates) and Òṣósi, the hunter. Èṣù gives Ògún permission to open pathways and remove blockages, and Òṣósi conveys to Ògún which obstacles need clearing. While Troy, in his death, spiritually traverses the fences he may have felt limited by, in true Wilsonian fashion, the play ends ambiguously, failing to make clear if other men in the Maxson family—Lyons, who has nine months remaining in his prison sentence; Cory, who is contemplating retirement after six years in the marines; and Gabe, who presumably will return to the hospital after the funeral—will overcome the institutional and societal barriers they face. Nevertheless, their newly tempered psyches enable them to better engage and navigate the crooked and the straights. What separates Wilson's play from the more traditional Western well-made drama is the more fortified psychological disposition of its warriors, not the Scribean happiness that ensues because all loose ends are tied.

Wilson signifies on the Kójódá through the plot structure of *Fences*, reiterating the Africanized ethos that is central to his dramaturgy. Consequently, Wilson invites readers and spectators to cross the boundaries of dramatic conservatism in order to more fully "see what's really there" beyond the railings which define the structure of the well-made play. Reading *Fences* through the lens of the Kójódá should not privilege Yorùbá cultural traditions over other transcultural readings but should reaffirm the idea that social behaviors within the American Century Cycle have roots in and/or are governed by spiritual forces and such forces can be appeased by human actions. Thus, any performance of *Fences* becomes a ritual enactment in which its characters strive to restore balance amongst mystical powers that will enable them to either move beyond external limitations, or, as Wilson says, "demonstrate the spirit of their character . . . with a certain zest and energy" (Savran 30). Conscientious applications of ethnocultural dramatic structural markers such as the Kójódá have implications for in Black Theatre textual production and critical treatment, if said markers are used deliberately with room to operate on their own integrity, independent of any well-made play constructs. The use of temporal formations such as the Kójódá can spur the genesis of a new, disparate form of playwriting and criticism, based on the ancestral bones of past traditions, and often subordinated cultural approaches to dramatic narration and critical treatment.

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⁴ This is a corrected biographical note.



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